

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 33 | Issue 1

Article 10

---

1-1-2016

## Creegan, ANIMAL SUFFERING AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Beth Seacord

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Seacord, Beth (2016) "Creegan, ANIMAL SUFFERING AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol33/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

*Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, by Nicola Hoggard Creegan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 224. \$58 (hardcover).

BETH SEACORD, Grand Valley State University

Nicola Hoggard Creegan has written a thoughtful and subtle work on the challenge of natural evil to the life of faith in a post-Darwinian age. She contends that “the problem of evil will not be solved just by clever arguments, but also by our stance toward nature and toward God” (8). To this end, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* is a work intended to help Christian believers recognize the God of love at work in the universe. Although some might be disappointed that Creegan does not attempt to provide the reader with a theodicy or a reason why God permits natural evil, she does deliver a theologically consistent way for believers to see God’s goodness in the natural world despite the manifest presence of violence and suffering.

The heart of Creegan’s argument can be found in chapters 6 through 9, where she argues that the parable of the wheat and the tares can be used to understand nature as an interrelated mix of the perfect and the corrupted. In Matthew 13, Jesus speaks of a farmer whose field of wheat has been seeded with weeds, or tares, by the enemy. The farmer’s servants ask if they should uproot the weeds, but the farmer tells them that they should wait until harvest to separate the tares from the wheat, otherwise they might accidentally uproot the good wheat while removing the tares. Although Jesus intends the parable to apply to human beings on the Day of Judgment, Creegan convincingly argues in chapter 6 that it is hermeneutically permissible to extend the metaphor of the wheat and tares from the human sphere to the entire biological realm.

Creegan argues that seeing the natural world as a mixture of deeply entwined good wheat and evil tares allows for three things. First, it allows the believer to recognize both good and evil in the natural world without having to “baptize what is patently not good, nor explain away the goodness that has always spoken to us of the presence of God nor . . . decide what is good and what is evil because they are so closely entwined” (7). So for example, a wheat and tares approach takes seriously the evil that befalls prey animals while also affirming the beauty and grace of the predator. She observes that “admiring the cheetah does not in any way make predation alright any more than admiring the soldier and his strength validates war” (94). Creegan rightly opposes Southgate (*The Groaning of Creation*, 2008) and others on this point: Although there is much that is good in a balanced and healthy ecosystem, the suffering of prey animals is still an undesirable, even evil part of the natural process. The wheat and tares approach also affirms that good and evil are deeply entwined in

such a way that in many cases it would be impossible to separate the two without causing other major harms. So we are not always morally obligated to untangle good and evil in nature: rescuing the prey would prove disastrous to the predator, eliminating crop-destroying insects ultimately undermines the eco-systems on which the crops depend. In many cases, the believer must then wait until the time when nature is redeemed to fulfill “the eschatological hope . . . of peace between humans and animals and between all levels and types of life” (172).

Second, the wheat and tares approach does not require an Adamic fall as the origin of natural evil. In chapter 1, Creegan points out that evolutionary science has “unravell[ed] old theodicies and old explanations for tragic and for death and suffering” (26). The historic fall is no longer a tenable explanation for evil and Creegan’s wheat and tares metaphor accommodates this fact; it is not human sin or error which causes the weeds to spring up amongst the wheat, but the work of the enemy. However, Creegan is reticent to blame devils for the origin of the tares as Jesus does in the parable because myths of “Satan or the Evil one . . . do not serve us well today” (93). But as I will argue below, Creegan creates a problem for herself as she argues that neither God nor humanity, but instead some “force opposed to God,” is responsible for the tares (75). It is unclear, though, what this force opposed to God is supposed to be if it is neither personal (i.e., Satan) nor natural (i.e., “chaos” or forces of nature outside God’s control).

Third, the wheat and tares approach allows the believer to see the goodness of God in the beauty and grandeur of nature. Creegan argues that “believing requires a confidence that when we look at nature we are seeing the work of God” (13). However, she explains that modern people have been captivated by a Darwinian picture of the world, which tells us that the processes that produce life are random, directionless, uncaring and amoral. Creegan argues that this perspective is injurious to faith and “undermines the sense of God’s presence with us” (98). The wheat and tares approach allows us to see God at work in the natural world—even within evolutionary mechanisms themselves.

One of the highlights of Creegan’s work is chapter 8, “New Dynamics in Evolutionary Theory,” where she considers recent trends in evolutionary science that belie traditional understandings of Darwinian evolution as “red in tooth and claw” as well as directionless and blind. New research in evolutionary theory has found a greater role for cooperation, symbiosis, and altruism than has been previously understood. Evolutionary fitness is about more than surviving bloody competition. It is also about survival through community and cooperation. This new perspective on our evolutionary past allows us to see the wheat present among the tares. In addition, new research also indicates that there may be, as yet, undiscovered laws at work guiding the evolutionary process. Creegan writes, “Newer understandings of evolution may . . . open up a way to seeing formal and even final causes as a not incoherent way of understanding evolutionary

processes" (126). Creegan presents a convincing case for the existence of deeper laws at work behind the scenes that "constrain the evolutionary process in hidden ways," pushing life toward specific fitness niches (117). Indeed, there is a whole field called "evolutionary development" dedicated to the study of these apparent underlying causes. Evolutionary development studies how purposeful, self-organizing embryonic development might be applied to evolutionary development. Other evidence for more fundamental evolutionary laws can be found in the phenomena of convergence where evolution picks up and repeats similar solutions like the eye structure, the leaf structure, or even the porpoise's body structure in separate environments. Chapter 8 presents us with a new perspective on evolution which serves as a corrective to the ruling paradigm of the blind watchmaker.

Although there is much to like in *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, in the end the reader is left wondering as to the origin of the tares. Creegan creates a contradiction for herself as she seems to eliminate every possible source of natural evil. In chapters 1 and 2, it is clear that human sin is not the cause of natural evil. Creegan is also clear that God is not responsible for the tares. Creegan argues this is not the best of all possible worlds—God did not intend weeds growing amongst the wheat. Perhaps God is not really the omni-God of the philosophers and does not have the power to overcome "chaos" or to fully control the becoming of the universe. Perhaps God has removed himself from the world, letting nature go its own way. Or perhaps God divests himself of some of his divine attributes in order to create, voluntarily limiting himself to make room for the creation. Or perhaps evil is just the absence of God. Creegan presents a convincing case against each of these options. Creegan argues that these solutions to the problem of evil are at odds with what we know about God from religious experience and from Scripture—she rejects the God of the deists and process theologians. She is also reluctant to blame the free agency of demonic persons. Although Creegan hints that some evil force beyond our comprehension is responsible for the tares, it is hard to see how and why this evil force could get past an omnipotent, omniscient God. It is not as if the tares are sown while God is asleep like the farmer in the parable. Creegan's God has the knowledge and power to stop the enemy from sowing the seeds but does not. Creegan does not tell us why.

Perhaps this is not a flaw in Creegan's work but is a gap in God's revelation to us. Creegan admits that the source of evil is "something beyond our story; it doesn't fit easily into any narrative that makes sense" (77). In the end, Creegan recommends that we ought to "admit the biblical revelation of God and live with the seeming inconsistency or paradox surrounding evil, finding in the mystery the path of salvation a consolation that is beyond our understanding" (55). To me this is not satisfying, but perhaps admitting that the source of evil is beyond our ken is the best that we humans can do.